

**Professor Lucy Noakes**

**After Dinner Speech at the 2023 KSA Annual Dinner**

**Army & Navy Club**

## **The reaction of the public to the death of the First Earl Kitchener of Khartoum**

I want to begin with a perhaps unlikely parallel: Lord Herbert Kitchener of Khartoum, the embodiment of late Victorian and Edwardian military masculinity, victor at the battle of Omduram, responsible for the 'scorched earth' policy enacted against the Boer population in the Boer War, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in India, and Secretary of State for War between 1914 and his death in 1916, and Diana, Princess of Wales, known for her glamour and her social activism, but also for her unhappy marriage, her very public struggles with her mental health and her open emotional style, so very different from the Royal Family that she had married into.

What on earth can these two characters have in common you might well be asking? Unfortunately for both of them, the thing that they hold in common is the timing, unexpectedness and impact of their deaths on British society. For social and cultural historians of 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain these are interesting because of what they tell us about social change in British society. Both deaths were unexpected – the result of accident or misadventure and both profoundly shocked their respective societies – if any of you are old enough to remember the feeling of shock and displacement that many of us – regardless of our political leanings or feelings about the monarchy – felt on hearing of the death

of Princess Diana, that is a pretty good model for understanding the impact of Lord Kitchener's death on wartime Britain in 1916.

Both deaths, because they were of widely known public figures and were shocking in their unexpectedness, were accompanied by conspiracy theories. Diana's death had, apparently: been planned by the Duke of Edinburgh; she was pregnant; the British state couldn't contemplate the thought of the future king having an Egyptian step father; her bodyguard had been killed; and that her medical care after the crash was deliberately botched. When Kitchener died the jingoistic magazine *John Bull* claimed that his death was most likely the result of plots by fifth columnists, Irish republicans or Bolsheviks while others simply refused to believe that such a figure could be dead – instead he was commanding the Russian army or living as a hermit in an Orcadian cave, waiting to be called back to aid his country. Ten years later a journalist claimed that Kitchener had survived the sinking, rowing himself ashore only to be shot by a government agent and buried in Norway. When he brought what he claimed were Kitchener's remains back to London for a national funeral, the packing case they were allegedly contained in was found to contain just a layer of black tar.

But the wider element that these deaths have in common is their respective relationships to changing public cultures of mourning and bereavement. The public outpouring of grief that followed Princess Diana's death, and the perception that the Royal family were not sharing in this collective emotion, shaped the odd week between her death and her funeral. Public feeling in this period, with many seemingly deeply grieving a woman they had never met and knew little of, has been much analysed, and I think can be understood as

symbolic of a shifting emotional culture in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain – marking the final decline of a belief in emotional restraint and the so-called stiff upper lip and instead embracing emotional literacy and expressiveness.

Similarly, the public outpouring that met the death of Lord Kitchener can be understood as telling us something interesting about changing emotional cultures, particularly around public expressions of mourning, and processes of bereavement, in First World War Britain. In a time of mass death, and thus mass grief, public displays of grief and distress at personal loss were frowned upon, seen as unpatriotic and unhelpful to the war effort, undermining the idea that the dead had died for a worthwhile collective cause and thus their deaths should not be grieved over, but should instead be a cause for pride. This restraint over death signalled the final end of the Victorian way of death, with its elaborate rituals, its lengthy mourning processes and its deeply embedded traditions around death, burial and bereavement. The death of Kitchener, like the death of Princess Diana, enabled some of those who had suffered personal losses to mourn in public – his death provided a space for the expression of grief that was being silenced elsewhere.

By the time of his death in 1916 Kitchener's name was entwined in public consciousness with the 'new armies' of the First World War. These were the volunteers who came forward in response to appeals for men in the first months and years of the war, with Kitchener, immortalised in Alfred Leete's famous *Your Country Needs You* recruiting poster, at the forefront of the recruiting effort. Service was for three years or until the end of the war, contradicting the belief that the war was widely expected to be over by Christmas, and reminding us that Kitchener was one of the first public figures

to understand that this was likely to be a long and hard war of attrition. Kitchener was Secretary of State for War, with responsibility for munitions production – so central to this new, industrialised landscape of war – alongside the recruitment, training and deployment of the new citizen armies. With Rawlinson and Derby he created the Pal's Battalions, battalions of men from the same neighbourhood or town, factory, office or sports club, who signed up together, trained together, served together and all too often died together. And it was several of the locally raised battalions of course that saw service on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme – 1 July 1916 – still the day of greatest losses, both deaths and injuries, for the British Army. And I think the impact of his death has to be understood in this context – as part of a far larger number of individual deaths, and a country that was, at least in some areas, reeling from the impact of sudden and catastrophic wartime loss.

While Kitchener had been under attack for the 'shell crisis' of 1915 – the failure of production to produce enough shells for the war effort, or at least enough shells that worked, he had remained popular with the public. He was, in many ways, an old-fashioned figure – the embodiment of high Victorian military masculinity – and it was perhaps this sense of his character that helps to explain his wartime popularity as the belief in his strength and resolute character helped people to believe that Britain could win the war. The National Archives have a collection of Birthday greetings to Kitchener sent on his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1915, and they include a greeting from a woman who informed Kitchener that 'my prayers have been with you since the war began. May God's blessing be with you and always is the sincere prayer of one who trusts you'. She added the poignant postscript 'Our only boy is in the army, please pardon the liberty'.

Kitchener was an embodiment of the British war effort, so when he died some of this belief in British strength and leadership died with him. The shock of his death was felt throughout society, though of course it is primarily the words of the powerful and well-connected that have survived for us today. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gives us a sense of the power of spiritualism at the time, and of thin and porous boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead. He wrote that Lord Kitchener had left behind 'the memory of something vast and elemental, coming suddenly and going strangely, a mighty spirit leaving great traces of its earthly passage.' Of course, this was a time of widespread loss and spiritualism had been embraced by some, including Conan Doyle, as a way of defying the finality of death, and offering consolation to some of the bereaved. The King noted his personal distress, writing in his diary that 'it is indeed a heavy blow to me and a great loss to the nation and its allies', ordering army officers to wear black armbands for a week in an official display of mourning. In the House of Lords Lord Buckmaster read out messages of condolence from the Greek parliament, the French Senate, and the Council of the Russian Empire. Tributes were also sent from Italy, Argentina, South Africa and the Vatican. Viscount French, Commander-in-Chief of the army in France told the Lords that 'we relied implicitly upon him to lead us to victory' while the Earl of Derby described his friendship with Kitchener, portraying a man who was 'supposed to be hard, taciturn, stern by the general public' but whom he described as 'shy, more shy than people imagined, and always diffident about himself.'

According to a diarist of the time the women stall holders in an East End market broke down in tears when the news of the ship's loss became known, and the popular tabloid newspapers the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror, with large working class and lower middle class readerships ran large spread about him. The Daily Mirror alone sold over one and a half million copies of its

special Kitchener memorial edition. News of his death was received by stunned crowds muttering 'now we have lost the war' and a Yorkshire corner attributed a suicide to depression following his death,

Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail*, which had led the case against Kitchener in the shell crisis of 1915 quickly changed its tune and dedicated several issues to Kitchener's life, death and legacy. Among these is a poem – *Destroyers* (not a very good poem it has to be admitted) which ended with the Stanza:

*They have fought, they have paid the price*

*Where the reddened ocean rolls*

*They sink to their resting place*

*Lord, of thine infinite pity and grace*

*Have mercy on all brave souls*

I think that this is interesting because rather than being directly about Kitchener, it memorialises him as one of many dead, enabling bereaved readers to read it as a memorial to their own dead, and their own loss.

The *Daily Mirror*, which had been launched to target a largely working class female audience, ran a special gossip section about K of K as they called him, including the news that he was 'not a woman hater', and that although he had never married he lavished attention on his aunts. He had received a gift of Passover cakes from an east end baker, and he collected blue china at his home Broome Park in Kent. When news of his death became known, the newspaper reported, it was not only British people who were affected – a wounded Belgian veteran was seen to burst into tears at the news.

Unsurprisingly Kitchener's death was followed by calls for a great memorial to the man – Asquith asked parliament to petition the king for a national memorial, but although there is a statue on horse guards parade, and a tower memorial on Marwick head in Orkney, close to where the Hampshire went down, no national memorial in the imperial centre of London was ever built. Instead, he is memorialised through these scholarships, through a side chapel in St Pauls cathedral, and through the inclusion of his name on several local war memorials, including Southampton's Hollybrook memorial to the almost 1900 men and women of the commonwealth who were lost at sea during the war. Again, it's interesting to think why for many, he was best remembered with others.

It seems fitting in many ways that Kitchener should be one of those whose body was never recovered, joining the thousands of others lost at sea, some in the Battle of Jutland, news of which was just coming through at the same time as his death, the 72,000 listed on the Thiepval memorial to the Battle of the Somme, the 54,00 listed on the Menin Gate in Ypres, and the many thousands of others remembered on walls of remembrance in smaller cemeteries and graveyards. Even when a body was recovered, could be buried, for those who mourned at home, it could be unreachable until well after the war's end. The decision not to allow the repatriation of the dead from battlefields and hospitals overseas, taken in 1915 in order to try and ensure equality of treatment across the social classes and nations that made up the new armies, may have served to symbolise the imperial state's reverence for ALL of its war dead, but for many of those who simply wanted a grave to visit, a place to leave flowers and other items of remembrance, it was often hard.

Kitchener's death came in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first total war – a long brutal war of attrition that killed between 9 and 11 million combatants, and 6-13 million civilians globally. Such a conflict inevitably shapes responses to death and bereavement – in Britain the old Victorian practice of lengthy and visible bereavement was itself dealt a fatal blow by the mass and unrelenting number of casualties. To grieve visibly and lengthily became seen as unpatriotic: women wrote to *The Times* early in the war to suggest that a purple armband, to denote pride rather than grief, should replace the traditional black mourning costume for the duration of the war. Funerals were often shortened and it became more and more common to see people asking for no flowers, and the sales of mourning paraphernalia like clothes but also statuary, urns, mourning cards and other items all declined hugely. By the time of the Second World War people were expected to greet bereavement calmly, stoically and in private – not to share their grief in case it affected others and somehow let the side down, affecting morale and a collective determination to push on and win the war.

The outpouring of shock and grief that accompanied the news of Kitchener's death then can be understood in part as a kind of displacement activity – many were mourning their own dead, but felt unable to draw on the traditions and rituals that had marked death, and reminded friends and neighbours that someone had been bereaved, as a way of marking this. Many others were anticipating death and bereavement – and remember that Kitchener's death was followed just under four weeks later by the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The shock that people expressed at his sudden death was also a response to their own losses, and to their inability to express grief in public. Expressing grief for Kitchener was acceptable. Much like the death of Princess



Diana some 82 years later, many of those grieving for Kitchener were, in fact, grieving for someone else. Like many of those lost in the industrialised battlefields of the First World War on land, in the air and at sea, Kitchener's body was never recovered and the site of the Hampshire is a war grave in which he lies, essentially anonymous, with the hundreds of others who died that night.

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[Profile for Lucy Noakes at the University of Essex](#)

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